

## THE INDIVIDUAL, THE SOCIETY AND LITERATURE (IN THE CONTEXT OF 'NEW POETRY')

Mythili P. Rao

Faculty of Languages, Jain University, Bangalore  
INDIA.

[mythili.rao@jainuniversity.ac.in](mailto:mythili.rao@jainuniversity.ac.in)

### ABSTRACT

*The dawn of 15<sup>th</sup> August 1947 saw the birth of a free India. Though, the euphoria of winning a long battle did not last long. The leaders of the Country were faced with a host of complex issues related to the socio-economic situation of an independent country. It appeared as if the people in power were not able to handle these issues. All along it was the common man who was struggling to come to terms with the reality which did not match the ideals. The poets of the time reacted to this situation of anarchy by expressing these issues in their poems. The world of literature also was strongly affected by these changes. Much before Independence the world of poetry had been revolutionised by a group of young poets who wanted to change the form and the themes which were in vogue till then. Independence gave an impetus to their efforts. New poetry, experimentalism, progressivism propounded by a new band of thinkers and poets heralded the change in the world of literature in general and in poetry in specific. Literature moved away from being created for 'swantah sukhay' (satisfaction of self – as it was during the Romantic period) and more for 'jan hitay' (well-being of the society). It is an attempt to exhibit the creative reactions of these young poets. By addressing issues hunger, poverty, disillusionment towards the leaders, the direction in which politicians and the Government was working and the lost identity of the 'common man', the poets of the time exhibited their concern for the individual, society and the country. They established a relationship between the individual, the society and literature.*

**Keywords:** Freedom and literature after 1947, revolution in form and context, issues of the common man, concern for individual and society.

### INTRODUCTION

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the period of progressive modernism, believed in 'Art for Art's sake'. But an artist does not live in isolation. Anybody involved in a creative endeavour, consciously or unconsciously, he constantly interacts with the dynamics of the society around him. Which then become the themes for the works of art. Poetry is one such creative expression. In fact, poetry, probably, has the unique position of being one that relies heavily on the external elements. Poetry is the product of the individual consciousness and collective consciousness. It is a creative expression of a person who reacts, constantly, very strongly to everything that is happening around him. It is expressed in the context of the historical truth which makes an attempt at reviving faith and belief not just in the Self but also in the society as a whole. In such a situation, it is quite but natural that the form of poetry will change according to the time.

Valmiki, who authored the great epic 'Ramayana', began his tryst with poetry when he saw the pathos of the female crane when its male counterpart was killed by the hunter. This typically represents the way a poet responds spontaneously to the immediate situation around him. Likewise, throughout the passage of time, poetry has taken the colour of the socio-

cultural-political circumstances that existed at the time. Hence, in Hindi, literature has moved from expression of valour to *Bhakti* (devotion) to themes associated with patriotic fervour and *shringara* (beauty). It was around the turn of 19<sup>th</sup> century that the country accepted Hindi as the link language and all the litterateurs started using *Khadi boli* as the link language of the country. This acceptance ushered in a deluge of literature which proved instrumental in whipping up the patriotic fervour during the struggle for independence. But the laureates could not give up the traditional form of creating literature, especially poetry, which was laden with a language, form and poetics dominated by Sanskrit canons. This was during the prime of the period called '*chhayavaad*' (romanticism). Of course it produced some of the greatest works in terms of aesthetically beautiful poetry. But somewhere down the line it lost touch with the common man. To understand this poetry you needed to have a very good grasp of grammar and poetics, which was not a reasonable demand on people who were fighting to be free from foreign rule. Also it was the time when the education system was getting increasingly anglicised. It was in 1936 that the first signs of change were felt during the congregation of the '*Pragatisheel lekhak sangh*' (Progressive writers' association).

But the birth of '*new poetry*' can be traced back to the publication of an anthology of poems called *TAR SAPTAK* (The Septet) in 1943. Edited and compiled by the literary critic and a well-known modern poet himself, S.H. V. 'Agyeya' it consisted of the representative works of 7 young poets, in each volume, who lead the movement on *Prayogvaad* (experimentalism) and *Pragativaad* (progressivism). They were the forerunners of modern hindi poetry.

In his introduction in '*Tar saptak*' Agyeya very clearly says that 'this new movement is not going to propagate any 'ism' or 'Vaad' but the poets are 'seekers of a path'(Agyeya, 2005). In his remarks in 'Contemporary Indian Literature' he said, "The quest of new values and regarding examination of the basic sanctions or sources of values may de-serve the name. Poets of this school generally prefer to call their writing new poetry"(Agyeya, 1959). The poets of this genre believed in questioning all the established, traditional rules of poetry-writing in terms of form, aesthetics, poetics and subject.

Extending the same line of thought, in the *Doosra Saptak* (the 2<sup>nd</sup> Spetet) published in 1951 Agyeya says that 'experimentation is the means to an end...which is truth.'(Agyeya, 2006) It is accepted that after the publication of the *Doosra Saptak* in 1951 the terminology '*nayi kavita*' or 'new poetry' gradually came into limelight. In 1954 Dr. Jagdish Gupt and Ramswaroop Chaturvedi edited an anthology called '*nayi kavita*' after which, formally, *nayi kavita* was accepted as the new wave. Lakshmikant varma saw this new poetic revolution as an opposite of hollow idealism and illusory courage.(Varma, 1954) The poets belonging to this new wave carved out new paths in terms of form, language, aesthetics and of course the subject matter. Most importantly New Poetry decanonized cultural standards, previous artworks and authorities. The poets' quest for new modes of expression sans decoration, much closer in understanding the needs of the common man, free of the traditional verse form, expressed more and more in the language of the common man. The free verse form can also be seen as an influence of the contemporary form prevalent in Europe and America. Poetic expressions of this period narrowed the aesthetic distance between man and the art form called poetry which stopped being something just to be admired. The texts were fragmented almost turning them into collages or montages, avoided the shaping power of metaphor and other literary tropes and promoted that form and content which is fluid and socially adaptable. Poetry was no more about mere aesthetic representations of imaginations projected through the beauty of nature but about the issues which dogged the *laghu manav* literally meaning the 'small' man fighting the complexities of the daily existence, sense of

loneliness, disjointedness, doubts, frustrations, complexities of the newly emerging modern, industrial, materialistic world, dejection of unfulfilled expectations in the new free India.

### THE INDIVIDUAL, SOCIETY AND LITERATURE

The relationship between individual and society is ultimately one of the most profound of all in social philosophy. It is more philosophical rather than sociological because it involves the question of values. Man depends on society. It is in the society that an individual is surrounded and encompassed by culture, a societal force. It is in the society again that he has to conform to the norms, occupy statuses and become member of groups. The society while constantly interacting with the other forces changes constantly, in order to survive and come out stronger. The poet, as a member of the society is not only at the receiving end of these changes but also takes the courage to express them through his poetry.

People of India had very high expectations from the newly formed government. The new found independence filled them with the hope of a fruitful and golden future. But somehow things did not turn out as expected. The country was riddled with the problems of hunger, poverty, extreme changes in the value systems due to the changing structure of a urbanized, industrialized society, unemployment etc. Disillusionment set in when the government could not deliver as fast as it was expected to. These aspects were very strongly and sharply expressed by the poet of the day. As Ashok Vajpeyi said, "The pressure of polity was increasing so much that it was not possible any more for mature poetry to escape from it. The truth of the times were enmeshed with political action, will and facts." (Vajpeyi, 1984)

In his poem called *15th August 1947*, Girijakumar mathur said:

*O soldier ! Be alert today  
The day of victory  
The doors to the country have opened up  
Be steady like the lamp!!*

In 1950 when we had our own constitution, Ramdhari Sinh Dinkar said :

*The largest democracy of the world is here today  
get the throne ready for 33 crore people  
it is not the king getting consecrated but the citizen  
lay the crown on the head of 33 crore people (Dinkar, 2001)*

These poets echoed the hopes of the entire populace of this country. Once the euphoria of victory settled down and the citizens of the country did not see the progress which was promised to them these voices of victory were suddenly muffled by the voices of disillusionment. The voice of the angry youth of the country was echoed by poets like Dhumil, Nagarjun, Kailash Vajpeyi, Venugopal, Kumar Vikal, Leeladhar Jagudi, Chandrakanth Devtale, Raghuvveer Sahay, and in a scattered way by Muktibodh, Agyeya, Prabhakar Machave. Though these poets were recognized as the representatives of New Poetry not all the poets find a place in *Tar Saptak*.

Dhumil, in one of his poems '20 years hence', questions :

*20 years hence and in this body  
hiding like the thief in the vacant streets  
A question  
Is freedom a similie for*

*3 tired colours borne by a wheel  
or is there any special meaning to this? (Brahmdev & Shivkumar Mishra, 2009)*

Most of the poets were very bitter about the structure of democracy in the country. Dhumil went to the extent of calling democracy a '*spectacle*' whose life is in the '*language of the madaari*'' (Brahmdev & Shivkumar Mishra, 2009) while casting doubts about the political leaders and the elections Leeladhar Jagudi says that '*Man is standing like a crack between stomach and democracy*' (Joshi, 2001) which very clearly states that the political process of democracy was not successful in alleviating the problems of the common man.

Kumar Vikal while commenting sarcastically about the state of the common man says -

*How innocent am I that every fifth year  
a small chit of paper reaches Delhi  
which goes, very far away from me after some time  
And I  
End up a number in the list of voters  
A number which  
symbolises a welfare system,  
an aged 30 year old. (Joshi, 2001)*

\*Madaari : a person who trains and makes the monkey dance

Socialism which was supposed to be the panacea for all ills, did not bring any relief. Mocking at the failure of socialism to improve the economic standards of the common man, in a poem titled '*the third darkness*' Kailash Vajpeyi says :

*The poor should continue  
To be poor  
Another 30 years  
socialism is very close to us. (Joshi, 2001)*

Vijendra while drawing a very disturbing visual of the poor of the country says:

*the cries of socialism  
whiplashes  
falling on his bare back (Joshi, 2001)*

Another poet Arun Kamal in his poem '*my own flow*' expresses how the 'ism's' are not helping the

plight of the common man in any way :

*So strange that  
like the peepul leaf  
between the two pages of  
Democracy and socialism  
Man is safely crushed. (Joshi, 2001)*

But in the meanwhile the politicians seem to be making hay while the sun shines!! They forget that they are the representatives of the people, by the people, for the people and are only interested in their

personal gains from the chairs that they occupy. As Uday prakash puts it –

*The cloth of the great man  
tied up  
on one side to the treasury of the rich man of town  
And the other  
To the chair of the parliament (Joshi, 2001)*

Raghuvver Sahay's poetry gives space to the Indians facing the hardships of life :

*The women with breasts bound  
hunger in their bundles  
weighed down by the rock-like sky  
bearing the weight of the stony back. (Joshi, 2001)*

But amidst all this hunger of the common man, the politicians seem to be flourishing and the poets mention the 'oversized bellies' of these politicians (Brahmdev & Shivkumar Mishra, 2009) Also they are busy making the plans to address these issues which are in no way bringing any solace to the common man.

In the meanwhile famine is playing havoc with the poor and the weak :

*Many days the stove cried, the mill sad  
Many days the one-eyed bitch slept near it. (Machave, 1995)*

It is not just the famine but also the hoarders / capitalists who are uncaring about the plight of the poor :

*The sick son  
seated on the torn mattress  
poor wife,  
removing the stones from the rice  
bought from the fair price shop (Joshi, 2001)*

Uday prakash in one of his poems has drawn a most distressing picture of poverty and hunger-

*Where your stove is cold,  
the vessel upturned and  
the one eyed bitch  
hungry since five days  
sleeping on the ash  
cold since five days (Joshi, 2001)*

The woman of the house does her best to keep the members of the family fed by sharing whatever is available. One of the poems of Dhumil while expressing this thought also points out at the large families and growing population –

*the elder one gets one, the younger one half  
Parbatti –balkishun get half of half  
totally 6 pieces (Brahmdev & Shivkumar Mishra, 2009)*

The most basic of necessities of life – food – is not taken care of, by the system, and the parents are unable to cope with these challenges because of lack of preparedness –

*Hungry children  
stone-faced mother  
father, like wood  
burning in his own fire.* (Brahmdev & Shivkumar Mishra, 2009)

Drawing the picture of one of the most ghastly outcomes of such poverty, Dhumil expresses how the women of the house are forced to turn towards activities which rob them of self-respect and his expressions are most aesthetic without being harsh or crude -

*The sun never lights up the courtyards  
coughing in the latrines, work like the padlocks  
where the old men turn blind after dinner  
young girls hold on to the darkness.* (Brahmdev & Shivkumar Mishra, 2009)

All these social ills are the fall out of the lack of a political – social system which could not protect the man for whom it was created.

In one of his poems called ‘*paridrishya*’ Bharat Bhushan Agarwal draws a very depressing picture of the total apathy of the entire system which at all times encourages the immoral and the lawless :

*Corruption, bribery, mockery of democracy  
A case filed against the rich man last year  
the minister has visited him four times  
to collect the money for the election fund.....* (Agarwal, 1967)

These lines also conveyed the changes taking place in the value systems of the society. All the values that were held dear before independence, those which formed the very basis of the fight for freedom, like, non-violence, tolerance, honesty or satyagrah etc. were discarded by the ruling class to be replaced with the values which were the very opposite to them. Dhumil in his epoch composition ‘*from parliament to the street*’ says :

*I have seen non-violence cutting the throat of the word on the throne  
I have seen honesty filling up the pockets on the sly* (Brahmdev & Shivkumar Mishra, 2009)

There was a steep moral decline of the politicians who were chosen as leaders who also ended up as very selfish and power-hungry individuals who would not stop at anything :

*The salty tunes of ‘vaishnav jan to’  
composed to lead the people astray* (Brahmdev & Shivkumar Mishra, 2009)

According to Agyeya these politicians are like the ‘*lord of the graveyard lounging on the dead body of humanity*’ (Agyeya, 1965)

Lakshmikant Varma while commenting on the condition of the people of the country after independence draws a very depressing picture of the common man –

*imagination handicapped, beliefs blind  
ambitions impoverished and  
dreams torn*

*have become the covering for the  
dead body of man* (Joshi, 2001)

Commenting on the governance Nagarjun says that, 'Truth is wounded, we have lost non-violence, the law of the land aimed its guns everywhere.' (Machave, 1995)

Growing Poverty and unemployment in the villages forces youngsters and even children to migrate towards cities hoping to improve their standard of life –

*Pan singh  
eight years old  
mother sending him to the city  
from moradabad  
hoping to earn  
lots and lots of money* (Joshi, 2001)

In the process the youngsters are forced to make compromises with their principles and are pushed in to a state of loss of identity –

*Pushing away joblessness he works  
to forget his name  
for that cold piece of steel with a face on it  
in his pant pockets  
for food to fill his stomach.* (Joshi, 2001)

The unresolved pangs of hunger give rise to another set of problems in the form of violence and naxalism as conveyed by Venugopal in his poem 'winds will not be silent' :

*Socialism means gandhian philosophy  
And naxalism too.* (Joshi, 2001)

The decades of 70's and 80's saw the rise of terrorism and extremism in the country which in its turn spread fear amongst people. This period saw the rise of some new poets like Devanshu Ranjan, Badrinarayan, Parmanand Srivastav, Vishnu Nagar, alongwith the expressions of the seasoned poets.

We should bear in our minds that these issues / problems did not suddenly crop up in the post independence period only. It was just that it took time for these issues find an expression in the poetry of the time. And the wave of New Poetry gave just that opportunity to the poets who were more than anxious to give voice to the prevailing issues of the times. As William Empson in his article 'Emotions in Words again' published in 'Kenyon Review' puts it, "A poet no doubt is not building an intellectual system. If you like the phrase, he feels the thought which are in the air or he is recording a time when his mind was trying out an application on thought, not providing a doctrine about them." (Joshi, 2001). Hence we find poets who are highly sensitive to the issues dogging the existence of the *laghu manav* who is otherwise ignored by the system around him. The very lack of a support system and the ignorance of the upper class makes his condition all the more pathetic. During the *chayaavadi* period we do find Pant and Nirala giving voice to the exploited, weak and downtrodden but it did not happen as a mass movement. During the period of New Poetry there was a deluge of such themes in the poetry composed by everybody who could stake a claim to be a poet!! Probably it was this lack of need to compose aesthetically created poetry, which gave importance to poetics and a sanskrit-dominated language, that helped in this revolution.

Though it was not as if there was a complete disregard for all the beautifying elements like a metaphor – rich language giving importance to poetics and also the weight of thought but apart from the few that have been represented in the *Tar Saptak's* it was not the dominant note. As Dharmveer Bharathi puts it, 'For the first time, New Poetry was not evaluated on the narrow divisions of the individual and society but on the basis of the relative values of, both, the individual and the society. We cannot understand the nature of New poetry in the absence of an understanding of the depth of these values. A lot of issues representing the revolt of the individual came to become a part of literature which in the end turned out to be for the welfare of the society and many a times in the name of social welfare many issues crept in which encourages conservatism, opposed development, were not in the interest of the society and were obstacles in the path of the overall growth of life. New poetry encouraged the rediscovery of the individual, reestablishment of the esteem of the individual.'(Bharathi, 1999) He further goes on to argue and question as to what we mean by social welfare and what social welfare do we expect from Poetry. As MacLeish says in 'Poetry and experience', "Poetry can inhabit the world, the actual world, even the political world. To practice it there, it is not easy, indeed it is more difficult that to throw one's self into politics, into revolution directly as a man, as a revolutionary." (Joshi, 2001) This New Poetry could not be rated according to the traditional rules of aesthetics. We could also say that they were de-sanskritized. New chapters have to be added to it. The poet believes that poetry today is not just about an aesthetic experience but about influencing. (Bharathi, 1999) Hence the need for the poet to be honest, not just with his expressions but with the very duty of the poet which includes awakening the society. All these poets expressed what they had experienced in their life term which lent itself to the realistic expressions in the poetry. Hence the angst, the frustration and helplessness at being treated callously by the very people whom he trusted.

*All lies :*

*Man*

*Country*

*Freedom*

*And love.....*

*Only hate*

*Is the truth (Brahmdev & Shivkumar Mishra, 2009)*

These few lines by Agyeya seem to summarize the predicament of a poet of the times :

*I am a poet*

*Visionary,*

*The eye - opener*

*Peacemaker*

*Carrier of meaning....*



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